

Harm is the Symptom — Communication Breakdown is the Condition

April 17, 2026 9:19 am



[Home](#) / [Hikitia! Tautoko Mai](#) / [Entertainment and Social Influence](#) / [Harm is the Symptom — Communication Breakdown is the Condition](#)

What community is showing us about communication and prevention

Is harm a symptom of communication breaking down?
And could that breakdown be a primary condition for harm?

This has direct implications for primary prevention. Prevention relies on people being able to engage early, openly, and in ways that build understanding. That depends on communication that is safe, accessible, and usable. When communication does not hold, opportunities for early support are missed, conversations are avoided or do not continue, and people step back before change can occur. The issue is not a lack of information, it is that communication is expected but not consistently supported.

Through our work in community, a consistent pattern is showing up. Communication is not holding in the ways it needs to.

It shows up in schools, within whānau, across community organisations, frontline services, and wider systems.

Schools describe difficulty engaging whānau, while whānau describe communication that is late, unclear, or not relevant.

Parents describe feeling disconnected from their children, while young people describe feeling dismissed.

Systems describe a lack of community voice, while community describe speaking up without being heard or seeing action.

When communication breaks down, trust reduces, assumptions fill the gaps, and people disengage or respond defensively. These are not neutral outcomes, they create conditions where disconnection and risk increase.

We have identified three core factors that influence whether communication holds or breaks down:

- Access and usability
- Safety and fear
- Everyday responses

Access and usability shape whether communication can happen at all. When tools, systems, language, and processes do not fit real life, communication becomes difficult before it begins. What is often labelled as disengagement is frequently a sign that communication has not been made usable.

Safety and fear shape how people show up. When communication does not feel safe, people hold back, avoid, or move into control. This may reduce immediate discomfort, but it reduces connection over time.

Everyday responses shape what people come to expect. Patterns like assumptions, partial understanding, and dismissive language can quietly close down conversation and signal that it is not safe or worthwhile to stay engaged.

We are also seeing how this plays out within whānau and community.

Communities are often unsure how to begin conversations, let alone move into the deeper conversations needed to protect tamariki. There is no lack of care, but that care is often expressed through fear rather than relationship. Conversations shift into positions, or do not start at all.

What is becoming clear is the need for ways to begin. Conversations that centre a shared goal, keeping tamariki safe, rather than defaulting into divided positions.

From here, the questions sharpen.

- What is driving the breakdown in communication, and has it become normalised?
- Where does the system support healthy communication, and where does it fail?
- What conditions keep these breakdowns in place?
- Where are healthy conversations happening, and what is shaping them?

Through this lens, the focus has shifted to exploring what supports communication to hold, across four key areas.

Internally, we are contributing to the Tautoko Mai communications strategy, sharpening how communication is understood and applied. This is exposing where communication is not landing and where stronger alignment is needed between what is said and what is experienced.

We continue to mobilise Start By Believing locally, testing how communication shapes response in key moments, and how a believing response influences whether someone continues to share or withdraw.

We are embedding Little Matters within local community networks, focusing on how small, consistent interactions shape connection over time, and widening the role of whānau and community as active contributors to prevention.

The Good Talk project continues to explore how conversations with young people happen in practice within whānau and families, what helps them start, what causes them to stall, and how people navigate real moments of emotion and uncertainty.

If communication is a condition that shapes whether harm can take hold, then it needs to be recognised and supported as such.

When communication works, people stay connected. They speak, they listen, and they remain in conversation. These are the conditions prevention depends on.



If communities can recognise and understand where communication is breaking down, they can better build, collaborate, and strengthen the protective factors that support safety and prevention.